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1972

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from

THE

P. S. Du Ponceau

HISTORY OF THE SILK BILL,

IN A LETTER

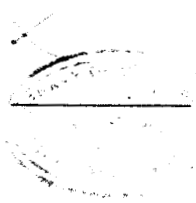
FROM

PETER S. DU PONCEAU,

TO

DAVID B. WARDEN, ESQ.,

LATE CONSUL OF THE UNITED STATES AT PARIS, MEMBER OF THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY, CORRESPONDING MEMBER OF THE INSTITUTE OF FRANCE, &c. &c.



Co PHILADELPHIA:

PRINTED BY A. WALDIE, No. 46 CARPENTER STREET,
1837.

24.

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PHILADELPHIA, 29th July, 1837.

DEAR SIR,

I have received your favour of the 24th of May last, in which you desire me to send you a copy of the report made by the committee on agriculture to the house of representatives of the United States, on the 12th of March, 1830, which was accompanied by a letter from me to the chairman of that committee, dated the 23d of February preceding, in which, at his request, I suggested a plan for promoting the culture of silk in the United States, so as to make it a source of national wealth to this country.

I regret to be obliged to say that, although that report has been several times published, in the first instance by order of congress, and afterwards in newspapers and in the pamphlet form, it has not been in my power to procure a copy of it for you; all those that I had, one excepted, which I preserve, have been distributed away, and have experienced the fate of such sibylline leaves.

Your object, however, being, as I presume, to be informed of the history of the measure to which that report relates, and of the present state of the culture of silk in the United States, I shall endeavour, in some other way, to supply the place of the document you have asked for, and I lay hold with pleasure of the opportunity you give me to commit to writing a brief narrative of the origin of that report, and the ill success that attended it.

I am saved the trouble of giving you the history of the silk culture prior to the arrival of Mr. D'Homergue in this country, by an article which I wrote for and published in the *American Quarterly Review* for December, 1831, of which I send you a copy; you will find in it many things which would have had a place in this letter, but which I omit, to avoid repetition. I shall, therefore, begin with Mr. D'Homergue's arrival at Philadelphia, which was in the month of May, 1829.

Mr. D'Homergue had been sent for from France by a society, then lately formed in this city, for promoting the culture of silk, who had unfortunately misconceived their object, and miscalculated their means. They were not in a situation to employ him. Without entering into useless details on this subject, suffice it to say that, shortly after his arrival, Mr. D'Homergue found himself a stranger in this country, destitute of money and friends, ignorant of our language, manners, and customs; in short, in a situation truly deplorable.

In that situation, he applied to me for advice. I saw his

letter of recommendation to the society. He was represented by their agent to be a person fully capable of fulfilling the objects which they had in view. He had been examined at Marseilles by men skilled in the art, and found sufficient. In his conversations with me, I found him intelligent, and consistent in the explanations which he gave of the various processes of reeling and throwing silk, of making sewing silk, and of various manufactures of that article. I was struck with the idea that his acquisition might be important to our country, and I determined to take him by the hand.

The first thing to be done was to make his talents known. He could not write our language, nor did he know the manner of addressing an American public. On my part, I knew very little of the silk business, to which I had never before turned my attention. I put myself under his tuition. He initiated me into the mysteries of *la filature* and *le moulinage* (reeling and throwing of silk); I read some books upon the subject, and, having him at my elbow, I wrote and published in his name, in the National Gazette, a series of essays entitled "American Silk," which became very popular, and were reprinted in almost all the newspapers in the United States. While writing those articles, I was struck with the importance as well as the difficulty of the art of *reeling*, without which the raw material not only cannot be manufactured, but cannot be exported, because the cocoons will rot in a sea voyage, and are too bulky and too light to bear a heavy freight. I observed that raw silk was an article in great demand in Europe, and that it might be made to us a source of considerable profit. I conceived the plan of dealing with silk as we had done with cotton, that is to say, to confine ourselves for ten or perhaps twenty years to the exportation of the raw material, during which time we should become perfect in the mode of preparing it for foreign manufacture, and then, and not before, we might begin to manufacture ourselves. The other arts, such as *throwing*, *weaving*, &c., we might learn from English manufacturers; but they could not teach us that of *filature*, because their country did not produce *cocoons*. None, therefore, but a Frenchman or an Italian could be to us a proper instructor in that art.

The essays were chiefly directed to developing and urging the adoption of this system. Some writers who had passed before, by means of some superficial book knowledge, for great adepts in matters relating to silk, were impelled by their vanity to attack this plan in the newspapers, and pretended that there was no difficulty in reeling silk, and that we might begin at once to manufacture. I took no notice of those publications, and, therefore, they produced little effect. The general opinion was in favour of my system. This induced me to publish the essays with an explanatory preface, in the form of a pamphlet,

of which I distributed the copies far and wide. I have sought in vain for one to send to you.

This was in the month of January, 1830. Congress were then in session. As a mark of respect, as is usual in such cases, I addressed to them a copy of the essays, not expecting any thing else but that they would give it a place in their library. They, however, were pleased to refer it to their committee on agriculture, then presided over by the venerable Ambrose Spencer, formerly chief justice of the state of New York, whose high character is undoubtedly known to you. I soon received a letter from that gentleman, in the name of the committee, approving of my plan, expressing the wish that Mr. D'Homergue should be employed in a national school of filature, and desiring me to confer with him upon the subject.

I accordingly conferred with Mr. D'Homergue, and, with his agreement, I proposed to the committee that he should be employed to instruct sixty young men in the art of reeling silk, and preparing it for exportation, so as to fit them to be afterwards directors of filatures. You know that the manual operation of reeling in large filatures is performed in Europe by females, under the direction of an overseer, as otherwise much loss would result from their unskilfulness, or from their neglect or inattention—the profits in this business depending on the quantity of well-reeled silk which is daily produced. Twenty women, at least, were to be employed in the normal filature at or near Philadelphia, who should work at the reel before the young men, who also should be taught the manipulation practically, that they might direct it with effect, and instruct women in their turn. Their instruction was to last two years; afterwards it was expected that they should be employed by the planters in the south, and companies in the north, and in the mean while the culture of silk, which was fast advancing in different states, might produce cocoons enough to set the business agoing. The young men were to be taught gratuitously, and maintain themselves at their own or their friends' expense. The women were to be paid for their labour.

Mr. D'Homergue was to receive from the government forty thousand dollars at the end of the two years, deducting therefrom the amount of the necessary expenses, such as the hire or purchase of a lot of ground, the erection of buildings, the machinery, the purchase of cocoons, and other incidental expenses, which were to be advanced by the government, but the materials at the end to remain the property of Mr. D'Homergue. I offered to be his security for the performance of his engagements, provided he were placed under my inspection and control. My personal services were to be gratuitous.

My object in proposing this plan was to introduce into the country a perfect and uniform method of reeling silk, and pre-

paring it for exportation or manufacture, but chiefly with a view to the former; so that when American raw silk should have been imported into Europe, its name alone should have secured its reception and a favourable sale. Those who are acquainted with this branch of trade, know of what immense advantage this would have been to our country. As to the planting of mulberry trees, and raising of silk worms, I thought it might be left to experience, and the instruction to be derived from the numerous books published upon these subjects; but the preparation of good merchantable raw silk, and the providing of a market for cocoons, appeared to me what was to be attended to in the first place; the rest, I thought, would follow of course.

I made the above proposal in a letter to the committee, who gave it their full approbation. I was desired to present it in the form of a bill, which I did, and the bill, such as I drew it up, with a trifling addition, was laid before congress with my letter, and a most flattering report from the committee, warmly recommending the measure. It is the same report which you have desired me to send to you, and of which a copy cannot now be had.

The session, however, was too far advanced to take up the business, and it was of course postponed to the next meeting. But, to all appearance, the report was most favourably received.

I had then a whole summer and the greater part of the autumn to dispose of before congress should meet again. I determined to spare no trouble or expense to convince the nation of the advantages of a good method of reeling silk, and of the exportation of the raw material to Europe. I established in this city a filature of ten reels, and twenty women; went to Connecticut to purchase cocoons, and bought all that were brought to me from different parts of the Union. I put the whole under the direction of Mr. D'Homergue. Our filature was open to all who chose to visit it. Our women learned to reel with amazing facility, and though some of my friends in Europe wrote to me that it would take ten years before they were perfect in the art, I was convinced that they would compass it in a much shorter time.

I was not satisfied with that. I wished to display something that would strike the public eye, and maintain congress in their apparently good disposition. I had two flags of the United States made of American silk, each twelve feet long and six feet wide; one to be presented to congress, and the other to the legislature of Pennsylvania. I had also some small articles made, such as cravats, handkerchiefs, &c., which, together with one of the flags, were exposed to public view at the exhibition of the Franklin Institute in this city. I also sent a quantity of

my raw silk to England and France, to be manufactured into stuffs, and distributed among our friends in this country.

Congress met in December, 1830. That was what was called the short session, and lasted only three months. Almost the whole of it was taken up by the trial of a judge in the senate, at which the members of the house of representatives were present. Nevertheless, a day was appointed near the end of the session for the discussion of the silk bill. In the mean time, I presented to the house the flag of the Union. I may say with truth, that it was received with enthusiasm. On a most flattering report of the committee on agriculture, congress resolved, that the flag should be displayed in the hall of their sittings, over the full length picture of General Lafayette, where it still remains.¹ There is no doubt that if the bill could have been brought on at that session, it would have passed almost unanimously.

Unfortunately, on the day when it was to have been taken up, Mr. Spencer, the chairman of the agricultural committee, who was to have led the discussion on our side, and whose presence could not be dispensed with, was engaged as counsel in an important cause before the supreme court of the United States. The argument lasted several days, and the opportunity was lost. Congress adjourned without discussing the bill.

But so zealous were our friends on the subject, that Mr. Spencer, passing through this city on his return to the state of New York, where he resides, brought to me a paper signed by eighty-six members of congress, expressing their sense of the importance of the silk bill, and their opinion that it would have passed at the last session, if it could then have been taken up. Mr. Spencer told me that it would have been signed by many more, but that it was done at the close of the session when a great number of the members had already departed for their homes, and others were preparing to depart. Those who signed that paper were afraid that Mr. D'Homergue might return to France—that I might get tired of the trouble and expense which this business occasioned me, and for which I never expected to receive compensation, and that it would consequently fail. I subjoin to this letter a copy of that paper. It is a literal copy. I have made no alteration in it, except interverting the order of the signatures, in order to show to what states the signers respectively belonged.

Thus I was encouraged to proceed. I went on with my filature, but not to the same extent as I had done the preceding year. I sent some of my raw silk to Mexico, where it found a good market. I sent some to England and France, not to be

¹ The flag presented to the house of representatives of Pennsylvania, was received in the same flattering manner, and ordered to be displayed in a conspicuous place in their hall.

sold, but to be manufactured into *gros de Naples*, and returned to this country. The silk sent to England lost only three and five eighths per cent. by what is called *waste* (*déchet*); that sent to Lyons lost more, but the stuff made of it was more delicately wrought. I kept up an active correspondence with those countries.

The silk I sent to England excited much attention there. Mr. Ewart, the member for Liverpool, mentioned it in parliament. The newspapers in London, Liverpool, and Manchester, teemed with articles on the subject. The English were led to expect a new source of supply of raw silk for their manufactures, and we a new branch of American exports. A number of silk throwsters, weavers, dyers, and silk manufacturers of various kinds, came to this country in the hope of finding employment; but were for the most part sadly disappointed, and many obliged to return home.

Such was the state of things when congress met again in December, 1831. I went with Mr. D'Homergue to Washington, determined to remain there until the silk bill should be disposed of. During the session, which was very long, I received from England some of the pieces of *gros de Naples* manufactured out of my silk, and distributed them among our friends in the capital, by whom they were much admired. Those from France did not arrive until after the adjournment. Every thing at first looked fair and prosperous; but the scene was suddenly changed.

The tariff question was brought before congress, and produced violent party animosities. The word *manufacture*, which had inadvertently been introduced into the title of the silk bill, became hateful to the opponents of the protecting system, and they fancied that if it should pass, it would lead to the laying of high duties on the importation of foreign silk goods. Yet the bill still had friends of both parties; but as the contest grew warmer, so as almost to threaten a dissolution of the Union, their number gradually diminished, and at last it became decidedly a party question. The French minister, M. Serurier, no doubt from patriotic motives, opposed it with all his might—not, that I know of, by diplomatic communications, but by speaking warmly against it wherever he found an opportunity. He saw in it the source of great injury to France, while the manufacturers of that country rejoiced in the hope of being supplied with the raw material that they so much wanted. Whether that gentleman's opposition had any influence on the final result, it is not in my power to say. I rather believe it had not, though some members might have been afraid lest the passage of the bill might prevent or delay the payment of the indemnity, which afterwards brought the two countries on the verge of a war with each other.

The times were now unpropitious. My friends advised me to suffer the business to go over to another session; but I had already gone to more expense than I could continue to afford. I pressed congress for a decision, and a day was accordingly appointed for that purpose.

On that day, the 22d of May, the bill was taken up and discussed in committee of the whole; the majority declared in its favour, and reported it to the house the next morning. A warm discussion took place, but in the interval the opponents of the measure had rallied, and their phalanx was not to be resisted. I have been credibly informed that a paper was circulated in the house, stating that if the bill should pass, the president would be obliged to put his veto upon it, and that he hoped that his friends would not place him in that unpleasant situation. I am well satisfied that such a paper was circulated; but I believe that it was without the knowledge or participation of General Jackson. Extraordinary, and, indeed, some unfair means were employed. Several of the members who had signed the paper brought to me by Mr. Spencer, as I have mentioned, voted against the bill, and some absented themselves when the question was taken.

The bill, however, was rejected only by a small majority. Among the members who voted against it there were some, undoubtedly, who conscientiously believed the measure to be unconstitutional, and that congress had no power to appropriate money to such a purpose; others were political economists, who thought that governments should not meddle with such matters, and whose favourite motto was, *Let us alone*. But on the whole it is plain to me that the bill was lost on party grounds, and not otherwise.

I was not present at the last day's discussion, but I was at that of the day preceding, in committee of the whole. The debates on both sides were published at the time in the newspapers. It gives me great pleasure to say, that full justice was done by all parties to my conduct and to my motives; and not a word was said that could be in the least personally painful to me, but, on the contrary, the greatest courtesy was shown even by my most inveterate opponents. The principal argument employed, was that the measure was unconstitutional. The most violent contented themselves with saying that it could only serve the purpose of setting up a foreigner (Mr. D'Homer-gue) in business, and that the public money could not be applied to such an object.

I had the pleasure to find that the members from Pennsylvania who were present, although almost all of the party opposed to the bill, voted (all but two) in its favour, and so did the members from Connecticut, whose jealousy had been attempted to be excited. The south, generally, voted against it.

Thus finally defeated in my patriotic design, I took leave of my friends and returned home immediately. I made no complaints nor appeals to the people in the newspapers or otherwise, but turned my thoughts to other objects. I found that I had lost three years of my time, and about four thousand dollars of my money, in pursuing a phantom, which at last eluded my grasp. I awoke, as from a dream, and consoled myself with the proverb which says, that the shortest follies are the best.

Five years have now elapsed since that time, and you will be, perhaps, curious to know what has been done in that interval with respect to silk. The impulse that was given still continues; but a different course is pursuing from that which I had pointed out. Mulberry trees are planted in every direction; associations with large capitals are formed and forming; for promoting the culture and manufacture of silk; the legislatures of the states are enacting laws for the same object; but I do not see any where a *filature* or a market for cocoons, such as I had established at Philadelphia, where they were brought to me from all parts of the Union, and continued to be brought long after my filature ceased to be in operation. But they found no purchasers.

The people are beginning where, in my opinion, they should end, by establishing manufactories. I have said that a great number of silk throwsters and manufacturers had come to this country from England. Those men, wanting employment, have persuaded the people to manufacture the raw silk of China and Bengal, as they do in Great Britain, which they have begun to do, in a small way however, in the New England states; while elsewhere the farmers who raise silk worms, employ them in making sewing silk after the manner of Connecticut.¹ Nobody thinks of producing and preparing the raw material as an article of merchandise. The opinion generally prevails that there is no kind of difficulty in the art of filature, and that any woman may reel silk perfectly without having received any instruction. I fear that much money will be sunk in these ill-concerted attempts.

The American people are impatient and wish to do every thing at once. *Go ahead* is their motto, and they are not deterred by obstacles. Nothing to them appears impossible; they plunge headlong into a scheme, and pursue it until they break, or until it succeeds. They now want to be silk manufacturers. I wanted them to be silk growers, and exporters of raw silk in the first instance. Time will show who was in the right.

My opinion is that large sums of money will be sunk in the course now pursuing, but that in the end America will be a great silk growing and silk manufacturing country. Ame-

¹ With the common spinning wheel.

ricans must have their own way. It often reminds me of the answer of a French courtier to the unfortunate Maria Antoinette, who asked of him a small favour:—" *Madame, si la chose est possible, elle est déjà faite ; si elle est impossible, elle se fera.*"¹ It is the American character, drawn to the life. The word *impossible* is not in their dictionary.

I am, with great regard and esteem,

Dear sir, your most obedient servant,

PETER S. DU PONCEAU.

DAVID B. WARDEN, Esq., Paris.

DOCUMENT REFERRED TO IN THE ABOVE LETTER.

We, the undersigned members of the twenty-first congress, feeling a great anxiety that Mr. John D'Homergue should remain in the United States for the purpose of instructing the youth of this country in the art of reeling silk, and in the various processes for preparing the same for manufacture or exportation, agreeably to the provisions of the bill for the promotion of the growth and manufacture of silk, now pending, and which could not be acted upon for the want of time, express our decided opinion that the bill would have met the approbation of the house of representatives, and that we consider it a measure of great national importance, as regards the industry of the country, in the profitable employment of various grades of its citizens, and as creating a staple which will not only save to the nation many millions of dollars, now annually drawn from the country, but will introduce speedily a new branch of manufacture of incalculable value to the United States.

March 1, 1831.

MAINE.

George Evans,
Samuel Butman.

VERMONT.

W. Cahoon,
Benjamin Swift,
Horace Everett.

MASSACHUSETTS.

J. Varnum,
E. Everett,
George Grennell,

Joseph G. Kendall,

John Reed,

Joseph Richardson,

John Bailey,

James L. Hodges,

B. W. Crowninshield,

John Davis,

H. W. Dwight.

RHODE ISLAND.

Tristram Burges,

Dutee J. Pearce.

¹ Madam, if the thing be possible, it is already done ; if impossible it will be done.

CONNECTICUT.

R. J. Ingersoll,
Noyes Barber,
J. W. Huntington,
W. W. Ellsworth,
William L. Storrs.

NEW YORK.

A. Spencer,
John D. Dickinson,
H. B. Cowles,
T. Beckman,
B. Arnold,
Robert S. Rose,
Ch. G. De Witt,
Isaac Finch,
J. Hawkins,
Abm. Bokee,
John W. Taylor,
Phineas L. Tracy,
Henry R. Storrs,
Henry C. Martindale,
Timothy Childs.

NEW JERSEY.

Lewis Condict.

PENNSYLVANIA.

Wm. McCreery,
Henry A. Muhlenberg,
John Gilmore,
W. Ramsey,
George G. Leiper,
Joseph Hemphill,
Samuel A. Smith,
T. Hartley Crawford,
Thomas H. Sill,
J. B. Sutherland,
D. H. Miller,
John B. Sterigere,
R. Coulter,
Joseph Fry, jr.
Harmar Denny,
Innis Green,
Joshua Evans.

DELAWARE.

Kensey Johns, jr.

MARYLAND.

G. C. Washington,
E. K. Wilson,
G. E. Mitchell,
B. I. Semmes.

VIRGINIA.

P. Doddridge,
John Taliaferro,
C. F. Mercer,
Robert Craig.

NORTH CAROLINA.

Lewis Williams,
William B. Shepard,
Edmund Deberry,
D. L. Barringer.

KENTUCKY.

R. P. Letcher,
Joel Yancey,
R. M. Johnson,
J. Kincaid.

TENNESSEE.

John Blair,
David Crockett.

OHIO.

Samuel F. Vinton,
E. Whittlesey,
Joseph Vance,
W. Creighton, jr.,
Wm. W. Irvin,
Joseph H. Crane,
H. H. Leavitt.

LOUISIANA.

E. D. White,
H. H. Gurley.

INDIANA.

John Test,
R. Boon.

ALABAMA.

R. E. B. Baylor.

MISSOURI.

Sp. Pettis.

FLORIDA.

Jos. M. White.